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ABSTRACT

This is a report on a study of leadership styles of elementary-school principals in a southwest Missouri school district. The purpose of the study was to examine the principals' leadership styles to determine the percentages of directive, nondirective, and collaborative styles. The study also examined which leadership styles are related to a positive school climate. Additionally, the study examined teachers' perceptions of the leadership behavior of their principals as compared with the teachers' perceptions of the school climate. Data for the study were obtained through a survey of 169 teachers in 34 schools. Each subject answered a two-part questionnaire. One part was to determine the principals' leadership styles, the other part to ascertain the climate of the school. Findings from the study show that the majority of principals practice a collaborative leadership style, based on the teachers' perceptions. These collaborative principals also contribute to the highest average scores on positive school climate. The most desirable leadership style to help contribute to a positive school climate, therefore, is collaborative. The results may deepen or sharpen discussion of leadership styles and school climate in administrator preparation programs and within schools and districts. (Contains eight references.) (WFA)

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A STUDY OF LEADERSHIP BEHAVIORS OF ELEMENTARY PRINCIPALS COMPARED WITH SCHOOL CLIMATE

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A STUDY OF LEADERSHIP BEHAVIORS OF ELEMENTARY PRINCIPALS COMPARED WITH SCHOOL CLIMATE

Abstract

The purpose of this study was to examine elementary teachers' perceptions of the leadership behavior of their elementary school principal as compared to elementary teachers' perceptions of school climate. Data for this study was obtained through a questionnaire that consisted of two sections, one to determine the principals' leadership style, and the other to determine school climate of the elementary school. Teachers who perceived their principals as utilizing a collaborative leadership style rated their schools as having more positive school climate than did the teachers who perceived their principals as using a directive or non-directive style of leadership. The majority of teachers rated their principals as using a collaborative leadership style. These results may have implications for educational administrator preparation programs.

Introduction and Rationale for the Study

The role of the elementary principal in effective schools has spurred many educational debates in recent years. A principal's method of administration, or leadership style, may affect the morale and productivity of teachers, as well as, the entire climate of the school. The problem many elementary principals encounter is that their leadership styles often do not enhance, but rather become detrimental to the overall school climate of their respective elementary schools.

Before the 1980's principals were judged by their ability to manage school operations with businesslike efficiency. Today's principal is faced with an academic mission. Several studies show that high achieving schools had principals who boldly led the academic program, set goals, examined curriculum, evaluated teachers and assessed results. Those principals who do not find a leadership style that is conducive to the overall success of their schools in all areas may find that their school climate is less than desirable, which may in turn, affect various aspects of the school, including student achievement. Many leadership styles have been examined in research on the effective principal, including collaborative, directive, and non-directive styles.

Collaborative leadership styles are the ones in which administrators and teachers routinely work together to promote effective teaching and learning. Little (1982) characterized the collaborative school as one in which teachers engage in frequent, continuous and increasingly concrete and precise talk about teaching practices. In addition, teachers are frequently observed and provided with useful critiques of their teaching. Teachers work together to plan, design, research, evaluate, and prepare teaching materials. The collaborative principal facilitates this process of teachers teaching working together and teaching each other the practice of teaching. Schmuck (1985) stated collaboration ultimately depends on the development of norms of cooperation among the school's personnel. Sagor (1992) felt that collaborative principals survey their staff often about their wants and needs. Machr, Midgley and Urdan (1993) contended that when people are personally invested in their work with an organization and have a voice in what happens to them that their work becomes more meaningful and significant because it is viewed as contributing to a higher purpose or goal.

A principal with a directive leadership style views his position as one of authority. The belief to this style of leadership is that the administrator knows better than the teacher what needs to be done to improve instruction (Glickman, 1990). Hersey and Blanchard (1998) compared the directive principal approach to that of authoritative leadership style where teachers hear little about the decision until the principal announces it. Bulach, Pickett, and Boothe (1998) believed that one of the biggest mistakes administrators make, which may result in termination or resignation, is the inability to motivate staff. The motivational climate related to the directive style of principal leadership is, therefore, of importance to school effectiveness.

The non-directive leadership style suggests that the supervisor behaves in ways that keep the teachers' thinking focused on observation, interpretation, problem identification, and problem solutions (Glickman, 1990). The principal is not a participant in the decision, does not offer his or her own ideas, and does not influence the choices. When individuals and groups of teachers possess greater expertise, commitment and responsibility for a particular decision than the supervisor does, then a non-directive approach is appropriate. How the non-directive style of leadership will be related to school climate, particularly when compared to the styles of collaborative and directive, is largely unknown.

Cheng (1993) found stronger school cultures had teachers with higher levels of motivation. In an environment with strong organizational ideology, shared participation, charismatic leadership, and intimacy, teachers experienced higher job satisfaction and increased productivity. Studies like the one done by Adams (1992) shows that principals who control many of the contingencies in the work environment and who are the source of much reinforcement for teaching behavior, are the keys to improving the morale and self esteem of teachers. This study sought to examine the relationship between various leadership styles and the school climate experienced by teachers.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of the study was to examine elementary principals' leadership styles in this southwest Missouri district to determine percentages of the following types of styles: directive, collaborative and non-directive. In addition, this study examined which leadership styles are related to a positive school climate. Finally, this study examined teachers' perceptions of the leadership behavior of the elementary school principal as compared to teachers' perceptions of school climate in their elementary schools.

Research Questions

1. How prevalent are the leadership styles of directive, collaborative, and non-directive in elementary school principals in this southwest Missouri school as perceived by teachers?

2. Is there a difference between teachers' perceptions of school climate based on their assessment of the principals' leadership style?

3. What leadership style is found in schools perceived by teachers as having the most positive school climate?

Research Design

A survey based on the San Diego County Office of Education, consisting of two sections, one to determine leadership style and the other to determine school climate was given to elementary school K-5 teachers from a southwest Missouri school district chosen by random sampling from 39 elementary schools.

The questionnaire used was based on the San Diego County Office of Education Effective Schools. It was divided into two sections: the leadership style component and the school climate component. The teachers indicated which leadership style, collaborative, directive, or non-directive, best fit their principals. The section on school climate offered a Likert Scale for the teacher to use to evaluate the school climate. Of the three hundred ninety questionnaires sent to thirty-nine schools in a southwest Missouri school district, five schools opted not to participate in the survey while thirty-four did choose to participate. A total of 169 usable questionnaires were returned.

Results

Leadership Styles of Principals. In the first section of the survey, teachers were asked to select their principals' leadership style given three choices: directive supervision, collaborative supervision, or non-directive supervision. A short synopsis of each type of leadership was provided for the teachers to assist them with their choice. Directive supervision was listed as a situation of high supervisor control and low teacher control. Collaborative supervision was listed as the supervisor and the teacher share equal control in instructional improvement. Non-directive supervision was listed as a situation of low supervisor control and high teacher control. In this district, 7% of those surveys returned reflected a directive leadership style; 60% of participants indicated that their principal used a collaborative leadership style; 33% of participants indicated that their principal used a non-directive leadership style.

Table 1

Leadership style percentages

Leadership Style	N	Percent
Directive	11	7%
Collaborative	104	60%
Non-directive	54	33%

N=169

School climate and leadership style. The second item on the survey asked participants to use a Likert scale to select their responses to 22 questions that related to school climate. Using 1 for strongly disagree to 5 for strongly agree, participants were asked to circle a number between 1 and 5. A school climate rating of 22 to 130 would result from this questionnaire. Of the 169 surveys returned, 11 teachers chose "directive" as their principal's leadership style, or 7% of the total number returned. These 11 questionnaires had an average of 77 points for the school climate questions. Of the 169 surveys returned, 104 teachers chose "collaborative" as their principal's leadership style, or 66% of the total number returned. The school climate ratings of these 104 questionnaires had an average of 92 points. The remaining 54 teachers chose "non-directive" as their principal's leadership style, or 33% of the total number returned. These 54 questionnaires had an average of 81 points for school climate. Results of these analyses can be found in Table 2.

Table 2

School climate ratings and leadership style

Leadership Style	Climate Average	Number of Schools	Average Likert Answer
Directive	77	11	3.5
Collaborative	92	104	4.2
Non-directive	81	54	3.7

Note. 5-point Likert items, 22 items total.

Analysis of Significant Differences. Additional analysis was performed to determine if the differences between the school climate ratings for the varying leadership styles was significant. Because of unequal group sizes only 11 scores from each category were included in this analysis, bring all groups to the lowest group size. These 11 randomly selected scores for each leadership category were included in a one-way analysis of variance. The three groups, directive, non-directive, and collaborative were compared based on their school climate scores.

The one-way analysis of variance revealed a significant pattern between the groups ($F(2,30)=114.425$, $p<.001$.) Furthermore, the post-hoc comparisons indicated that all three groups were significantly different than the other two. (See Tables 3 and 4)

Teachers who perceived their principals as having a collaborative leadership style also perceived their schools as having the most positive school climates. The next highest school

climate ratings were for schools with principals perceived as non-directive. The lowest school climate ratings were indicated for those schools whose principals were perceived as directive.

Table 3

One-way analysis of variance for school climate based on leadership style.

	Sum of Squares	*df*	Mean Square	*F*	*p*
Between Groups	1327.333	2	663.667	114.425	<.001
Within Groups	174.000	30	5.800		
Total	1501.333	32			

Table 4

Multiple comparisons of school climate for leadership style.

(I) Leadership Style	(J) Leadership Style	Mean Difference (I-J)	*p*
Directive	Collaborative	-15*	<.001
	Non-Directive	-4*	<.001
Collaborative	Directive	15*	<.001
	Non-Directive	11*	<.001
Non-Directive	Directive	4*	<.001
	Collaborative	-11*	<.001

Note. * The mean difference is significant at the .05 level.

Summary, Conclusions, and Implications

A great deal of research has been conducted and volumes of material have been written in the last 20 years on principal leadership styles and school climate. Colleges and universities strive to prepare quality administrator candidates who can contribute to an effective school and positive school climate. Hersey and Blanchard (1988) believed that no dominant leadership style appears, but rather various combinations are evident. Adams (1992) feels that principals are the source of much reinforcement for teaching behavior and are the keys to improving teacher morale.

Percentages of leadership styles. Based on the sample responding to this study in Southwest Missouri, the majority of elementary teachers perceived their principals as using a collaborative leadership style. About one third of these teachers indicated their principals used a non-directive leadership style. Only s small percentage indicated their principals used a directive leadership style.

Differences in school climate. Collaborative principals' average scores were the highest while directive principals had the lowest average score for school climate. Principals using a non-directive style had lower ratings for school climate than the collaborative principals, but slightly higher ratings than the directive principals.

The findings from this study show that the majority of principals practice collaborative leadership styles, based on teacher perceptions. These collaborative principals also contribute to the highest average scores on positive school climate. This writer infers that the most desirable leadership style to help contribute to positive school climate would be collaborative. What remains unknown, however, is whether collaborative leadership contributes to positive school climate or if collaborative leaders prefer schools with positive school climate.

Results of this study may deepen or sharpen discussion on leadership style and school climate. Colleges and universities can re-design the courses they offer and implement a stronger emphasis on the importance of collaborative leadership. Graduate students can gain important knowledge in their course work and be able to recognize and model collaborative behaviors associated with building principals. Professors can utilize collaborative leadership scenarios in their classes and expect that their graduate students will have a better understanding and appreciation for this method of administration. For those schools and districts that have low teacher morale and weak school climates, this study suggests implementation of collaborative principal leadership.

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